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ABSTRACT

In stimulating students to read, study, and appreciate poetry by having them write poetry, it is helpful to devise ways to show off student work. Three ways of displaying student poetry which have proved to be successful are the publication of a class poetry magazine, the collection of one-line metaphors on a single subject (some of these metaphors can be used on the "thought for the day" board, along with lines from famous poets), and the production of a slide/tape presentation consisting of poetry read aloud, accompanied by guitar music and corresponding photographs. (JM)

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Teaching Poetry to Adolescents: Nine Principles Plus One

Nancy Womack

In the introductory chapter of the "Poetry" volume of Stephen Dunning's Teaching Literature to Adolescents series,[1] the author discusses reasons why most Americans don't like poetry and outlines nine basic principles which teachers could employ to change student attitudes on the subject. Included in his list of principles is this one: "Students who are asked to read and study poetry must sometimes be asked to say something poetically." (p. 30) The reasoning behind this principle is all too clear: it makes them better, more sympathetic readers of poetry than "students who have never squinted out an image or happened on to a metaphor of their own making." (p. 32)

Once a student has expressed himself poetically though, should it stop there? I think not. The purpose of this article then, is to recommend taking Stephen Dunning's principle one step farther by suggesting that teachers devise ways to "show off" student work. Three successful experiences which I have had include the "publication" of a class magazine; a broadside of one line metaphors on a single subject, some of which were used on our "thought for the day" board; and the production of a slide/tape presentation.

The magazine more or less evolved of its own accord as a whole

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[1] Stephen Dunning, Teaching Literature to Adolescents: Poetry (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1966).

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class became involved in experiencing poetry.[2] Students were given several occasions to express themselves poetically on a variety of subjects; so the copy just accumulated over a period of time. Having kept an individual file folder for each student proved invaluable when we decided to produce a magazine. It was simply a matter of letting each student sort through his folder to find what he considered his best poems. Each member of the class was required to submit at least one piece of writing. The class editorial staff made final selections (with instructions from me to include something by everyone), typed the copy, designed the cover, set up the dummy, and arranged with the school print shop for printing. The finished product, "Poems of '73", was distributed to the student body at a special assembly program which our class presented. The students who produced it had something of their own to share with others--something of which each could say, "Look, this is mine; this is me; if you want to know me, look behind my metaphors; the mask is stripped away."

Students like to be introspective, and however shy they may appear to be, most of them really enjoy the attention that comes from having their work displayed, printed or even read aloud.

Recently in an attempt to prepare a class of high school seniors for

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[2]See "A Student Oriented Approach to Teaching Poetry" (ERIC, February 1975).

studying Wordsworth's "Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," I asked them to write papers in which they were to make recollections from their own childhoods. To introduce the assignment, I played a record of "Yesterday" by the Beatles. Then I told them to think about yesterday in terms of childhood and growing up while they listened to mood music which I would play for them. They were instructed to write for thirty minutes using any form they wanted to. At the end of the half hour, I asked them to look back over what they had written and try to sum everything up in one metaphor completing the sentence "Yesterday is _____." Of the thirty students who completed the assignment, no more than ten wrote really good metaphors. Nevertheless, I typed all thirty closing sentences on a single sheet, distributed them to the class and let class members recommend the ones they wanted to have on our "thought" board, sharing space with such greats as Shakespeare, Milton, and Pope. What greater ego boost could I give them than that?

Having students illustrate their works for bulletin board displays is another approach which one might take when students produce short poetic statements such as one line metaphors or haiku. The artistic ones can do their own; others can usually find suitable pictures in magazines or on greeting cards. A series of small posters with colorful backgrounds made

in this manner can bring a classroom to life while at the same time it can give recognition to those who have "happened on to a metaphor of their own making."

In our visually oriented society, the use of film presentations is almost always an effective way of making a point. So why not turn poetry writing into an audio-visual experience? My juniors and I had one last year that some of them still talk about as seniors, and we're planning to produce an even better one this spring. Before describing the presentation, some background information might prove helpful: Our school in Titusville, Florida, is located on U.S. Highway # 1 which at this point runs parallel to the Indian River and which is directly across from the John F. Kennedy Space Center's Vehicle Assembly Building. Across the highway from the school is a little park called Bird Watcher's Park. From this location one can see the hugh VAB, a looming symbol of man's technology, contrasting with images of sea gulls and tiny islands dotting the surface of the water. It was here that I held my class at 8 o'clock one morning with the only requirement for the day being that each student hand in some kind of poetic expression at the end of the hour. While the students meandered along the water's edge or leaned against palm trees, or simply lay belly down in the grass searching for ideas, I experimented with my camera, loaded with slide film and equipped with

a telephoto lens. Using various colored filters and a cross screen, I first took pictures of everything in the surrounding area, from diamond sparkling pictures of the sun on the water to close-ups of blades of grass, trying to capture with photography the different moods which I anticipated getting in their poetry. After taking pictures of all the things I thought they might write about, I proceeded to photograph the students. Using the telephoto lens allowed me to do this without being too obstrusive; thus, I could photograph them being more themselves.

The next step in this venture was to get a committee of volunteers to make a tape recording of the poems. Five readers and a guitarist then met with me after school one day to arrange the poems in order, read and record them while our guitarist improvised a guitar solo to accompany each poem. After much trial and error, we arrived at a format we all liked and did our final take. When the slides were processed, I arranged them to fit the tape being sure that each poem would be accompanied by some kind of thematic illustration as well as by a photograph of the poet.

Admittedly this kind of display involves a lot of planning, time and expense, but our experience was worth it. The self satisfaction it provided all of us was immeasurable. Teachers who are not photography buffs can almost always find a student who is. Being the "official"

class photographer would also be quite an ego boost for some young person. And some schools with more liberal budgets would probably even finance such a project.

These are just a few ideas for displaying student work. With enough exposure to poetry and enough experiences at attempting to write it, perhaps Mr. Dunning's comment that "most Americans don't like poetry" will soon be passe. I'm beginning to hear a few rumbles to that effect already.